

Killing Time: Stanley Schtinter's *Last Movies*
(notes for a marathon screening)
Erika Balsom

As artist-curator Stanley Schtinter puts it, *Last Movies* allows us to "see what those who see no longer last saw." This screening of the final films watched by famous individuals brings the medium of cinema into contact with the matter of death. Between the two, there is not the shock of juxtaposition but the bleed of likeness: they curl cosily around one another like the intimate friends they are. There is the cliché, as familiar as it is unverifiable, that when your time is up your whole life flashes before your eyes, like a film experienced in a dilated instant. (Does this mean these last movies are in fact penultimate movies?) And then there are the many evocations of the cinema as a modern *memento mori*: it is "death at work" (Cocteau), "change mummified" (Bazin), "death twenty-four times a second" (Mulvey). The medium brings us face to face with finitude, not because the stories it tells about death are particularly compelling but because it captures ephemeral traces of life and reanimates them forever after, infusing the petrified past with spectral vitality. In 1929, Jean Epstein ventured that "death makes its promises via the cinematograph." Schtinter's epic undertaking yokes these vows to the moment of their fulfilment.

Normally, the flickering screen only quietly whispers *vanitas vanitatum*. This murmur likely turned into a roar for Bette Davis when, in 1989, aged 81 and sick with cancer, the star watched the last movie of her life, one of her own: James Whale's *Waterloo Bridge* (1931). In it, she has only a small role, sixth billing in the credits. Yet she is nevertheless there, her youthful self preserved across the decades like an insect in amber. Among Schtinter's selections, Davis's last movie stands out for its apparent deliberateness. It is as if the ailing star sought to at once defeat and welcome death by revisiting one of her earliest on-screen appearances. Of course, it might have been just another professional obligation: Davis was receiving an award from the San Sebastian International Film Festival, where a Whale retrospective was also taking place. She probably had to be there, like it or not. Who knows if she knew it was to be her final visit to the cinema. But wait – was Davis even at the projection? It is possible, probable even, but the historical record cannot confirm it.

Last movies tend to be like that: they aren't chosen in the way that a last meal would be chosen by a prisoner awaiting execution. And depending on the circumstances, their lastness can throw up some

resistance to verification, plunging curator and audience into the pleasures and perils of speculation. Death is a certainty – but the moment of its arrival, for most at least, is anything but. A last movie is just another unremarkable beat in the rhythm of life until the reaper visits. Then a sea-change occurs; retroactively, the movie becomes a crepuscular artefact it had never before been, coloured by the shadow of death's imminent approach, bound forever to the end of an illustrious life. Even though Schtinter includes deaths that were planned (the Heaven's Gate cult) and deaths that were perhaps somewhat anticipated (Bruce Chatwin), his endeavour is a macabre tribute to the curiosity and horror that this radical contingency inspires. As the many hours of the programme pile up, questions might pop into the viewer's mind: is the lastness of these last movies significant in any way or is it a mere fact? Is it but a plausible fiction? What do these films reveal about the lives to which they belong? Perhaps something; likely nothing. Each title sparks a desire for meaning – each last movie is an incitement to discourse, a story to be told – and each equally allows the threat of meaninglessness to run riot.


Last Movies brings together its selections by the force of an external event, one which bears not on the films themselves but on little-known details of their exhibition histories, and then orders them not according to any curatorial vision but by date of disappearance. It abandons all those calcified criteria most frequently used to organise cinema programmes: period, nation, genre, director, star, theme. Nothing internal to these films motivates their inclusion, their "quality" least of all. Although Schtinter can choose a death to research, the title to be shown is dictated by history. This is all to say that *Last Movies* embraces chance, an avant-garde strategy its orchestrator has been known to marshal in previous undertakings.

And so it should be for a programme about death. The tenacity of the "life review" flashback as a trope in fiction films could be attributed to the fact that people who have had near-death experiences claim to have encountered the phenomenon. It is more likely that this convention endures because it satisfies a reassuring fantasy: that life will ultimately attain coherence. The fantasy of that "last movie" is undone by the reality of Schtinter's *Last Movies*. They are often random and in large part unchosen; they throw significance into crisis and demand acquiescence to externality. They are, in other words, like death itself.

Last Movies is published by Tenement Press, an occasional publisher of esoteric, accidental, and interdisciplinary literatures.

TERRASSEN PRESENTS STANLEY SCHTINTER'S

LAST MOVIES

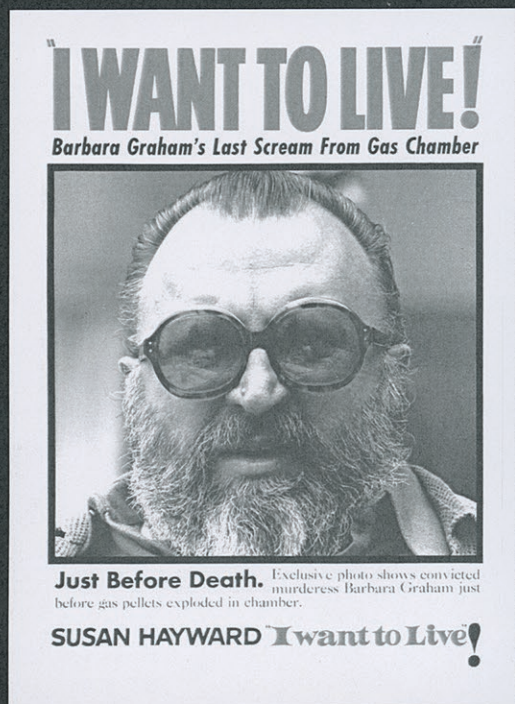


12-13
01/24

HUSETS BIOGRAF (Rådhusstræde 13) & PALADS (Axeltorv 9)

LAST
MOVIES
COPENHAGEN
* 12 †13
JANUARY
2024

Last Movies is a film programme, durational artwork and book; as its creator Stanley Schtinter writes, it is "a dedication to the absence of choice, to chance. If there is any bias in the cast-list it is a bias coded into the telling of the first century of cinema (that I parasitise); the result, a forensic of the last earthly dance of a star, and the pause they took (if indeed they did) to catch a movie."



Last Movies explores the subject of the final films watched by a selection of 20th-century luminaries. Delving into the lives and ultimate viewings of figures ranging from Franz Kafka to John F. Kennedy to Kurt Cobain to members of the Heaven's Gate cult, the project maps a strange and surprising cultural history from a seemingly arbitrary scatter plot.

Image on front: Death mask of John Dillinger
1,3,4: Altered film posters by Stanley Schtinter
2: *Last Movies*, published by Tenement Press, 2024

Terrassen is a roving cinema in Copenhagen that engages with the social life of film. All screenings are free and open to everyone. Terrassen is supported by the Danish Arts Council. For more info on past and future screenings visit www.terrassen.bio

FRIDAY JANUARY 12TH 2024, HUSETS BIOGRAF

18.30

Introduction by Stanley Schtinter

UNFINISHED PROGRAMME: FILMS CUT BY DEATH

Charlie Parker (d. 1955)

Stage Show (Dorsey Bros., 1955 w/Count Basie/Kate Smith/Charlie Manna) 1m

Opening credits only unfortunately as this particular episode — Count Basie! — is lost. Parker died laughing madly watching the Dorsey Bros.

Boris Vian (d.1959)

I Spit On Your Grave (Michel Gast, 1959) 5m

Five minutes into the film's premiere, Vian stood up in the cinema auditorium to declare his hatred for the producers. "Call yourselves American? My ass!" He then dropped down dead from a heart attack.

Lee Harvey Oswald (d.1963)

War Is Hell (Burt Topper, 1961) 15m

Oswald is apprehended in the Texas Theater watching *War is Hell*. The celluloid scratches, curls and burns in the only available segment of this "lost" movie, as though the physical matter of film is shocked by the B-movie's sudden appearance in history.

Sergio Leone (d. 1989)

I Want to Live! (Robert Wise, 1958) 15m

Around fifteen minutes into Wise's fabulously titled *I Want to Live!* Sergio Leone, at home with his wife on the couch watching the film on television, died from a heart attack.

Mel Calman (d. 1993)

Carlito's Way (Brian De Palma, 1994) 40m

At the point in the film Carlito spares the life of Benny (who would — spoiler alert! — return to take Carlito's), cartoonist Mel Calman died from a heart attack, at the Empire Cinema in Leicester Square, London.

Stanley Kubrick (d. 1999)

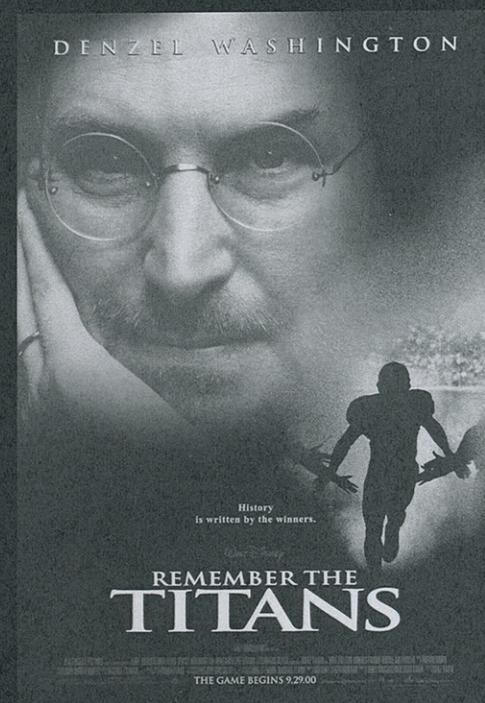
Eyes Wide Shut (Stanley Kubrick, 1999) *trailer* 1m

Kubrick completed his cut of the trailer for *Eyes Wide Shut* and died that night in his sleep. Possibly he watched John Smith's *Blight* in-between times, but we'll never know.



20.00

Book launch and signing in the bar



21.00

Introduction by Stanley Schtinter

Steve Jobs (d. 2011)

Remember the Titans, Boaz Yakin, 2001, 113 mins

'I was so surprised he wanted to watch that movie. I was like, Are you sure? Steve was not interested in sports at all. And we watched and we talked about a number of things and I left thinking that he was pretty happy. And all of a sudden, things went to hell that weekend! Tim Cook had been appointed CEO of Apple eight weeks earlier at Job's Palo Alto home, where he'd been invited once again, this time to watch *Remember the Titans*. A 'true' story about an American football underdog, it's the kind of film made passable by long distance air travel, or, indeed, sickness. Job's health permanently failed soon afterwards.

SATURDAY JANUARY 13TH 2024, PALADS

16.30

Introduction by Stanley Schtinter

Jean-Luc Godard (d. 2022)

Film annonce du film Drôles de Guerres (1er tournage),

Jean Luc Godard, 2022, 20 mins

Godard finished *Film annonce du film Drôles de Guerres (1er tournage)* / *Announcement of the Film 'Phony Wars' (1st shoot)* and returned to his desk. There, he smoked his final cigar, and booked a taxi to take him to the assisted suicide facility. He asked his publicist to make it very clear that he wasn't ill, and he wasn't depressed, but simply 'exhausted'.

Kurt Cobain (d. 1994)

The Piano, Jane Campion, 1993, 121 mins

There is no empirical evidence of Kurt Cobain's last days. He was effectively on the run, alone, and left no account. On April 1st in 1994 he 'escaped' from rehab in Los Angeles, and travelled to Seattle. On April 3rd he was seen at the Cactus restaurant in Madison Park eating with some friends. They began with dessert: Kurt had Bananas Dulce (which is still on the menu - banana pudding sautéed in brown sugar and rum), according to Brett Chatalas, co-owner of the restaurant, from whom they asked for the local movie listings. The diners agreed on Jane Campion's *The Piano*, and Kurt went to pay. His credit card bounced (Courtney had cancelled it to try to prevent him from scoring heroin), so he wrote a cheque. He was last seen later that night at Linda's Tavern.

